**Symbolism and Allegory  
in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird >**   
**by Cleopatra Margaritopoulou**

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| "I'd rather you shoot at tin cans in the backyard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."(96)        The above words are what Atticus Finch tells his children after they are given air-rifles for Christmas. In fact, the title of the classic novel by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* was taken from this passage. At first glance, one may wonder why Harper Lee decided to name her book after what seems to be a rather insignificant excerpt. After careful study, however, one begins to see that this is just another example of symbolism in the novel. Harper Lee uses symbolism extensively throughout this story, and much of it refers to the problems of racism in the South during the early twentieth century. Harper Lee's effective use of racial symbolism and allegory can be seen by studying various examples from the book, namely the actions of the children, of the racist whites, and of Atticus Finch.        One of the more effective allegories in the novel is the building of a snowman by Jem and Scout. There was not enough snow to make a snowman entirely out of snow, so Jem made a foundation out of dirt and then covered it with what snow they had. If the snowman was made completely out of snow, Jem's action would not be so significant. Scout is very surprised when she sees the brown snowman and she exclaims: "Jem, I ain't never heard of a nigger snowman." (72), and to this Jem replies: "He won't be black long." (72). Scout's words indicate the strange nature of the snowman which is half-black, half-white. Jem, however did not find it peculiar and he "scooped up some snow and began plastering it on". Gradually Mr. Avery turned white? (73). The symbol of the snowman, like every other symbol in literature, may have various interpretations depending on the reading of the individual. In the specific case the snowman can be seen in two ways.  Firstly, this alteration from black to white can be considered as a merging of the two races into one, without any differences between them to separate them, an equality of black and white people. The change of colour (black to white) suggests the superficiality of the colour of the skin, which should not be a criterion for judging people and dividing them into categories. Atticus's praise of Jem's creation, "I didn't know how you were going to do it, but from now on I'll never worry about what'll become of you, son, you'll always have an idea" (73), can be extended to mean that Atticus approves his son's views. Thus, the idea evoked to the reader is that people who carry healthy beliefs and reject racism and prejudice, like Jem, will most likely succeed in their lives.        An additional way of looking at the symbolism of the snowman is that it signifies miscegenation; marriage or sexual relations between people of different races. People at Maycomb county, both black and white, were very prejudiced against the idea of miscegenation and those who committed it and would immediately marginalise anyone who disregarded the general 'rule' and had sexual intercourse with a person of another race. The fear of marginalisation led Mayella Ewell to lie in court about the incident with Tom Robinson and this fear was also the reason her father beat her when he saw her making advances to a negro. Bob Ewell could never accept the fact that his daughter was thinking of giving herself to a black man and punished her severely for that. The best example of how everybody behaved towards mixed people is the case of Dolphus Raymont's children who were "half white, half coloured" (167). Jem uses the word 'sad' (167) when he refers to them because "they don't belong anywhere. Coloured folks won't have'em because they're half white; white folks won't have'em 'cause they're coloured, so they're just in betweens, don't belong anywhere" (167). On the contrary, Jem's combination of mud and snow declares that miscegenation can exist and that it does not have to be an 'in between' situation, but a reality.        The next example of symbolism in the novel, the fire, is closely related to the symbol of the snowman. The night when the children had built the snowman, there was a fire in Miss Maudie's house. Scout's words, "at the front door, we saw fire spewing from Miss Maudie's dining-room windows. As if to confirm what we saw , the town siren wailed up the scale to a tremble pitch and remained there, screaming" (75), give the reader a clear picture of the situation that night. One of the effects of the fire, apart from burning down Miss Maudie's house of course, was that it turned the 'morphodite' (80) into a pile of dirt, after all the snow melted because of the heat. Taking for granted that the snowman is a symbol of equality between blacks and whites, then the fire, which was the cause for the melting down of the snowman, depicts the prejudice of the people of Maycomb, who strongly believe that blacks and whites are certainly not the same.        Moreover, if the snowman is seen as a symbol of the bonding of the two races, here again prejudiced people, as the symbol of the fire suggests, object to this assertion as well, believing that a mixed child is, in fact, no better than a pure black one and that the two are, actually, one and the same. And this prejudice is so strong that it does not only refer to half negroes, but as Jem explains to Scout the day of Tom Robinson's trial, "around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black" (168). The most important fact concerning the symbolism of the fire, no matter which meaning the snowman has is that as fire is a stronger element than snow, in the same way prejudice overwhelms the humanitarian beliefs of a very small of people and, inevitably, it prevails.        Jem's attempt to beat white racism is also obvious in the incident when he and Scout had to contradict the insults of Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose. Mrs Dubose, among other things, said to the children that "your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for" (108), a phrase which shows not only her views on the subject of Atticus defending a black man, but the views of the rest of the town. This was too much for Jem to tolerate, so as they were going by her house later that day, "Jem snatched [Scout's] baton and ran flailing wildly up the steps into Mrs Dubose's front yard? He did not begin to calm down until he had cut the tops off every camellia bush Mrs Dubose owned, until the ground was littered with green buds and leaves" (109). Since Camellia flowers are white, their destruction by Jem could symbolise his effort to destroy the prejudice of the white people against negroes. However, the only thing Jem manages to do is cause his father's anger and be punished for his action by reading to Mrs Dubose for a month. Jem also had to "work on'em (camellias) every Saturday and try to make'em grow back out" (111). The growing back of the flowers could have two interpretations. The first one is that prejudice cannot be defeated so easily and, once more, it prevails. Mrs Dubose says to Jem one afternoon: "Thought you could kill my Snow-on-the-Mountain, did you? Well Jessie says the top's growing back out. Next time you'll know how to do it right, won't you? You'll pull it up by the roots, won't you?" (116). The flowers have grown as before; no trace remains of their previous destruction. Jem's attempt to defeat white racism was in vain. Nevertheless, Mrs Dubose offers him a better, more effective way to accomplish his goal next time. That is to strike preconception to the 'roots', before it is even born, otherwise the flowers will be growing back stronger. The reader knows that Jem failed because neither Mrs Dubose nor the town people changed their minds about the Tom Robinson case. The day Mrs Dubose died, Atticus said that she was "conscious and cantankerous. She still disapproved heartily of my doings" (118). Her mind was fixed till the last moment of her life, the same way everybody's opinion was set about Tom Robinson and negroes in general.        A second interpretation of Jem's nursing of the flowers is that it denotes his courage which he nurses in order to be able to tolerate people's criticism of his family, especially of his father. He was forced to take care of the camellias just as he was forced to live with anger, disappointment and a big question mark in his young heart about the workings of grownups. Atticus "never thought Jem'd be the one to lose his head over this" (110). However Jem did 'lose his head' and now he has to find the strength to control his emotions in order to avoid further trouble. This courage was hard to find but Mrs Dubose did find it and managed to break herself from morphine before she died. She also made sure Jem got a white waxy camellia she had prepared for him. The waxy camellia, the "Snow-on-the-Mountain" (118), could be a symbol of courage. She built her spirit little by little just as when she was making the camellia. Now it is Jem's turn to build his own. And as the camellia out of wax does not wither, in the same sense, true courage may be hard to build, but once built, it never leaves you.        Mrs Dubose's camellias are not the only flowers that can be seen symbolically. Mayella Ewell's red geraniums also carry an important meaning. During the Robinson trial the reader is given a description of the Ewell's property. It is said that "what passed for a fence was bits of tree-limbs , broomsticks and tool shafts, all tipped with rusty hammer-heads, snaggle-toothed rake heads, shovels, axes and grubbing hoes, held on with pieces of barbed wire. Enclosed by this barricade was a dirty yard containing the remains of a Model-T Ford, a discarded dentist's chair, an ancient ice-box, plus lesser items: old shoes, worn-out table radios, picture frames, and fruit jars, under which scrawny orange chickens pecked hopefully". (176) The general picture one acquires by this description is that of a small dump, a place totally disordered like the "playhouse of an insane child" (176). One can easily guess the rank of the people who lived there. However, "against the fence, in a line, were six chipped-enamel slop jars holding brilliant red geraniums, cared for as tenderly as if they belonged to Miss Maudie Atkinson. People said they were Mayella Ewell's" (176-7). In a decaying house, Mayella's geraniums seem out of place. They would belong better in Miss Maudie's yard, since such flowers need to be taken care of with love, which did not appear to flow in the Ewell family. Nevertheless, they were there so they cannot be ignored. Therefore, the red geraniums could symbolise the good that exists in everybody; no matter how corrupted one may be, the predisposition to good still exists. In the novel it is Atticus who tries to convince his children that this assertion is valid. The day after Scout made the mob which attempted to lynch Tom Robinson to depart, Atticus says that "Mr Cunningham's basically a good man, he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us. So it took an eight-year-old child to bring'em to their senses, didn't it? That proves something - that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they're still human" (163). According to Atticus, it is enough to be human in order to know the difference between good and evil and decide which one is best. Most people have 'blind spots' which do not allow them to see clearly sometimes, but this does not necessarily mean that they are totally mean. Like the red geraniums which offer their beauty in the middle of a dump, so does good lies in the heart and mind of every human being. The geraniums could also symbolise good human beings like Atticus who can be found everywhere, even in the midst of a corrupt society.        It is noticeable, moreover, that some characters' names in the story are implicitly symbolic. Scout, for example, like the familiar military scouts who were dispatched from the main body to gather information, is a seeker, scouting out new areas of experience. Additionally, Atticus's name is a reference to the district Attica of ancient Greece in which Athens was located. In some way Atticus's rational approach to life is similar to that of ancient philosophers, especially the Stoics: "The four cardinal virtues of the Stoic philosophy are wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit and should, according to the Stoics, love and help another, regardless of rank and wealth" (Encarta Encyclopedia). Atticus is the main character who serves these four virtues, justice, wisdom, courage and temperance in the story, just like the ancient philosophers of Athens did. As a lawyer he is a faithful servant of justice for all people, black or white. His wisdom lies not in his education but in the way he raises his children and his knowledge of people's attitude. For him courage is Mrs Dubose's effort to break from morphine. He says to Jem the day she died: "I wanted to show you what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what" (118). From his point of view, Atticus showed his courage when he accepted the Tom Robinson case even though he knew beforehand that it was a lost battle. And, finally, the reader knows he believes in temperance when he advises Scout and Jem not to get carried away by people's provocation, and sets the example when he does not react to Bob Ewell's threats. Therefore it becomes evident that Atticus could easily be considered a Stoic as he made their philosophy his way of living. He could be a citizen of ancient Attica as his name implies.        Another symbol in the story is Jem's broken arm as well as Scout's ham costume. It has been mentioned that Atticus did not expect Jem to be so greatly affected by the events of the trial. Scout was more likely to be influenced because she was younger. None the less, after the jury convicted Tom Robinson, "it was Jem's turn to cry. His face was streaked with angry tears as we made our way through the cheerful crowd. 'It ain't right', he muttered" (218). He could not accept the fact that Tom was found guilty even though his innocence was proven. A few months after the trial a pageant was held to celebrate the Halloween. Scout was dressed as a ham. In order to fix her costume "Mrs Grenshaw took some chicken wire and bent it into the shape of a cured ham. This she covered with brown cloth and painted to resemble the original" (259). When the pageant finished and the children were returning home, they were attacked by Bob Ewell. Scout was not hurt at all but Jem's arm was badly broken: "His left arm lay out from his body: his elbow was bent slightly, but in the wrong direction" (271). Scout was still wearing her costume the time of the attack and "this thing probably saved her life" (275). The conclusion is that Jem's broken arm at the end of the story is a sign that he will be wounded for ever by what he has experienced. Scout, on the other hand, has been protected from harm by her ham costume, a symbol of the sense of humor and naivety that insulate her from bitterness.        The fire and Mrs Dubose's white camellias are not the only symbols of prejudice. Tim Johnson is another symbol of prejudice and his shooting by Atticus is also highly allegorical. Jem and Scout did not know their father was such a good shooter and they were very surprised to see him shooting: "With movements so swift they seemed simultaneous, Atticus's hand yanked a ball-tipped lever as he brought the gun to his shoulder. The rifle cracked. Tim Johnson leaped, flopped over and crumbled on the sidewalk in a brown-and-white heap. He didn't know what hit him" (102). Tim Johnson represents prejudice, and how, like a rabid dog , it spreads its disease throughout the town. Atticus Finch is seen as a hero for he kills racism and prejudice, not allowing it to spread any further. In a conversation with his brother Jack about the coming trial and how to "get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb's usual disease" (94), Atticus is the one who refers to people's prejudice as a 'disease'. He accepts the Robinson case in an effort to fight against that, even though he is sure to fail.        The theme of prejudice in the novel can be best perceived through the symbol of the mockingbird. Atticus advised his children that if they went hunting for birds to "shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (96). Miss Maudie explains this further by saying that "mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (96). Bluejays are considered to be the bullies of the bird world. They are very loud, territorial and aggressive. The bluejays represent the prejudiced bullies of Maycomb, such us Bob Ewell. Mockingbirds, on the other hand, are innocent and all they do is sing beautiful songs; they would not harm anyone. It is easy to understand that the mockingbird in the story is Tom Robinson, a harmless man who becomes a victim of racial prejudice. Like the mockingbird, Tom has never done wrong to anyone. Even the jurors who sentenced him to death had nothing personal against him. They found him guilty mostly because they felt that to take the word of a black man over two whites would threaten the system under which they lived, the system of segregation. After Tom was killed for attempting to escape from prison, Mr Underwood wrote in an editorial that he "simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" (247). The parallel between killing a mockingbird and killing a cripple man, Tom, is apparent here. Both of them are completely defenseless before their persecutors and, thus, it is sinful for them to be killed in that way.        However, Tom Robinson is not the only mockingbird in the story. Boo Radley is another harmless creature who falls victim of cruelty. He is unjustly regarded as an evil person and used as the scapegoat for everything bad happening in town. Women are afraid of him and so are children. When the sheriff decided that he would not arrest Boo Radley for killing Bob Ewell and that would present his death as an accident, Atticus asked Scout if she understood the meaning of this decision. Scout replied that she did. Her exact words were: "Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (282). Boo here is also compared to the gentle bird and again it would be a 'sin' to be punished for the murder he committed. Boo Radley's view as a mockingbird emphasizes the universality of human nature. Tom Robinson's case may be bound up with the complex social problem of racial prejudice, but any neighbourhood can have its Boo Radley, all but forgotten except as the subject of gossip and rumours.        The symbol of the mockingbird can be applied to Boo Radley from another point of view as well. The mockingbird has no song of its own. It just imitates other birds. Therefore it makes itself present and is seen through other birds. In the same way, Boo Radley is seen through the eyes of other people. He does not have a character of his own. What the reader knows about him is what other people say. He is believed to have stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors, to peep through windows at nights, to be "six-and-a-half feet tall, dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, his hands were blood-stained; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time" (19). Of course, none of this stories about him is true. In fact the stories tell us more about the people who spread them rather than Boo Radley himself.        Symbolism is indeed used extensively in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird.* The symbolism reveals the prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the citizens of Maycomb County, their fears and the immoral things they did. It also reveals an attempt to purify people from these feelings, by a hero figure, a model to the community, Atticus Finch, as well as his two children, who surely follow in his footsteps. The story ends with the reading of a book by Atticus, *The Grey Ghost*, another symbol perhaps for Boo Radley whose "face was as white as his hands and his grey eyes were so colourless" (276), a description fitting to one of a ghost. Before she falls asleep Scout describes the story which happens to be about someone falsely accused of doing something he never did, exactly like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley, the two mockingbirds of the story so wrongly treated by others. The closing of the novel with another symbol for the two victims of human malice suggests the power Harper Lee sees in symbolism, which carries the message better than words. At this point she seems to agree with J.B.S. Haldane, a British Scientist, who stated: "In fact, words are well adapted for description and the arousing of emotion, but for many kinds of precise thought other symbols are much better" (Columbia). Perhaps this is the reason Harper Lee chooses to declare her rejection of prejudice and racism through the use of symbols; because they are more effective than words |